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SIPDIS

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, ELA, PRM/FO

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SUBJECT: UNHCR OFFICIALS PRAISE SYRIAN SUPPORT FOR IRAQI

REFUGEES; CRITICIZE IRAQI GOVERNMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Chuck Hunter for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At a meeting with NGO representatives and diplomats in Damascus on December 14, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa Radhouane Nouicier bluntly criticized the Iraqi government for "failing to support" the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis living as refugees in Syria and Jordan. Arguing that Iraqi leaders were "disconnected from reality," he also criticized UN officials working in Iraq for their alleged reluctance to request increased funding for Iraqi refugees. Nouicier and UNHCR officials in Syria commended Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad and Syrian Arab Red Crescent President (SARC) Abdul Rahman Attar's participation in the December 9-11 "international dialogue on urban refugees" in Geneva, and praised Syria's commitment to supporting Iraqi refugees. The UNHCR officials also noted Syrian support in closing the al-Tanf camp for Iraqi Palestinian refugees, beginning on December 11 and slated for completion in January 2010. END SUMMARY.

UNHCR OFFICIAL BLASTS IRAQI GOVERNMENT

¶2. (C) The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, Radhouane Nouicier, harshly criticized the Iraqi government in a December 14 meeting with diplomats and NGOs operating in Syria. Nouicier claimed the GOI "has not been willing to do a single thing" to assist Iraqi refugees in neighboring countries like Syria and Jordan. He said Iraqi leaders were "disconnected from reality," and cited examples of statements from the president and prime minister urging Iraqi refugees to return home due to improved security conditions on the same day hundreds were killed and wounded in bombings.

¶3. (C) Nouicier also criticized UN officials working in Iraq, stating they were too ready to accept GOI statements regarding the improved security situation in Iraq. He said UN officials in Iraq had failed to support requests for greater money for Iraqi refugees on the premise that conditions in Iraq have improved sufficiently to allow greater numbers of refugees to return home. "This is a debate we are having internally," Nouicier related.

¶4. (C) The regional director stressed he did not believe the situation in Iraq justified encouraging larger numbers of refugees to return home, and that he did not expect the number of Iraqi refugees to recede quickly. "We cannot suddenly pretend Iraq is a developed country with no problems and the refugees can all go back," Nouicier concluded.

SYRIAN OFFICIALS PARTICIPATE IN GENEVA CONFERENCE

¶5. (C) UNHCR Country Representative Renata Dubini and Deputy Representative Philippe Le Clerc praised Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad and SARC President Abdul Rahman Attar for their participation in the December 9-11 "international dialogue on urban refugees" conference in Geneva. Dubini related Miqdad and Attar "took advantage of a good opportunity" to represent Syria's contributions to Iraqi refugees on the world stage. She said delegates reacted positively to Miqdad's and Attar's statements regarding Syrian support for refugees, and that the SARG was pleased with the results of their participation in the conference.

¶6. (C) UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres met Miqdad in Geneva on December 11 and commended Syria's commitment to Iraqi refugees. Le Clerc reported Miqdad reiterated Syria's support for Iraqi refugees on its territory and promised to continue to work closely with UNHCR to provide essential services to them.

AL-TANF CAMP SET TO CLOSE

¶7. (C) UNHCR officials were also enthusiastic about the SARG's cooperation in plans to close the al-Tanf camp for Iraqi Palestinian refugees near the Syrian-Iraqi border. They reported the first batch of Iraqi Palestinian refugees were moved from al-Tanf to al-Hol camp on December 11. In all, 83 Iraqi Palestinian refugees who are not scheduled for imminent resettlement to Western countries left the camp on December 11. Two to three additional transfers to al-Hol camp are scheduled for the coming weeks. UNHCR officials said al-Tanf camp should be empty by the end of January 2010.

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¶8. (C) Most of the refugees in al-Tanf are scheduled to depart Iraq for resettlement in Western countries, including Sweden, Finland, and Canada. The remaining al-Tanf refugees will be transferred to al-Hol pending resettlement. UNHCR officials stressed all Iraqi Palestinian refugees in al-Tanf and al-Hol will eventually be resettled outside Syria. "We very much view al-Hol as a temporary solution," Le Clerc said.

¶9. (C) Le Clerc added UNHCR regularly lobbies the SARG to refrain from transferring several thousand Iraqi Palestinians known to be in Syria with forged documents (many of them living in the Yarmouk area of Damascus) to al-Hol camp. "We hope they will continue to look the other way until a solution is found," he said. (NOTE: Sheikha Hessa bint Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani concluded on December 12 a three-day visit to Syria and Iraq to encourage greater international and Arab support for Iraqi refugees. During her visit, the Qatari princess traveled to the third camp housing Iraqi Palestinian refugees, al-Walid camp, located four kilometers inside Iraqi territory. END NOTE.)

HUNTER